Mocke Jansen van Veuren

INTERSECTION: AN INSTANCE OF SPATIAL USAGE IN URBAN JOHANNESBURG

BIOGRAPHY

Mocke Jansen van Veuren was born in 1976 in Johannesburg, South Africa, and has lived in various parts of the city. He graduated in 1999 with a BA Fine Art at the University of the Witwatersrand. From there he worked in educational publishing and arts research, as a professional animator, and from 2002 as a Lecturer in the Multimedia Department at the University of Johannesburg. In 2003 he and Theresa Collins launched the *Minutes* Project, an ongoing study of the city through film and audio recordings.

→This essay forms part of an ongoing study of time, rhythm and motion in urban Johannesburg. A short film produced as part of the *Minutes* Project by Theresa Collins and myself is analysed as a detailed document of the movements, presences and absences around a street corner in the inner-city centre over a period of 24 hours. The results of this analysis are presented against the backdrop of contested conceptions of rights and ownership within the always fluctuating urban environment of Johannesburg.

The colloquium *Johannesburg and Megacity Phenomena* exemplifies the convergence of differentiated modes of thought (literary, scientific, artistic) in the study of the urban. It is significant that the artists' works are placed alongside contributions from some of the most noted contemporary thinkers in the field of urban sociology, validating a many-faceted way of dealing with the complex subject of urban studies.

In this essay, I introduce an interdisciplinary approach to the study of urban economies of space and movement which draws on the work of French philosopher Henri Lefebvre, particularly his analytical approach to space. This exploration forms part of a larger, long term artistic endeavour focused on the study of space and movement in Johannesburg through the mediums of time lapse photography and experimental audio recordings, as well as detailed analyses of this material. The bulk of this work has been produced under an ongoing project titled *Minutes*, created by myself and Theresa Collins in 2005; I introduce this project in more detail below.

I show how Lefebvre's ideas around space can be used in a detailed analysis of time lapse footage shot at one location over an extended period, and how this kind of analysis reveals otherwise hidden dynamics of urban 'spatial practice' (Lefebvre's term, discussed below). Within the context of Johannesburg, this kind of study inevitably also starts to uncover underlying conflicts and tensions in the deployment, control and usage of urban spaces, and a critique of these issues brings the work closer to the domain of the social sciences and geography.

The overall project is hybrid in nature, located as it is between artistic practice and urban geography (which is itself close to the social sciences). The results or outputs of a project like this will not work or fit directly within the structures and canons of urban geography; however, the intention is that, from within a critical artistic practice, comments and interventions can be made that have validity and impact within the spheres of other disciplines. Similarly, the theoretical underpinnings of the project are drawn mostly from disciplines other than arts or cultural theory, Lefebvre (as a social theorist often cited by urban geographers) being a case in point.

Before presenting my analysis of the short time lapse film used here as a case study, I introduce key terms from Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1991), focusing on the concept of spatial practice, which is fundamental to the discussion which follows. After a detailed breakdown of the film, I further unpack its content with reference to the concepts of appropriated space, diverted space and the right to the city, also drawn from Lefebvre.

Spatial practice

In the first chapter of *The Production of Space* Lefebvre (1991:38) outlines a triad of terms which form the foundation of the rest of the work: spatial practice, representations of space, and representational space. These terms, and the constant dynamic interactions between them, present us with a set of analytical tools with which physical space, as well as our experiences and conceptions of it can be understood.

In introducing us to the concept of "spatial practice," Lefebvre (1991:38) writes that "The spatial practice of a society secretes that society's space; it propounds and presupposes it, in a dialectical interaction; it produces it slowly and surely as it masters and appropriates it."

This concept encompasses the expectations (often culturally determined) we have of the spaces we live and operate in, and the way in which we live out or 'practice' our understanding of space. The structure of everyday movements between and within our understood (and expected) spaces, on a micro and macro level, produces those spaces. On a smaller scale, spatial practice encompasses the set of habits and expectations that determine the layout of a room or a house, from the heights of ceilings to the arrangements of rooms in relation to one another (bedroom, toilet, kitchen, lounge). The very existence of these differentiated rooms are the result of a spatial practice that has a practical aspect (the spaces would all have scale and proportions that relate in some way to the human body) at the same time as being strongly culturally determined. On a larger scale the spaces of a city are produced through a complex web of interrelated spatial practices, as well as political and economic agendas. The functioning of any city relies on (and even demands) a certain level of agreement between all its inhabitants and occupants in terms of how spaces are used and traversed.

In a layered and highly contested urban environment such as Johannesburg, the seemingly harmonious process of a space that takes its shape in response to a society's needs seems to be an anomaly. The analysis undertaken below outlines these tensions more clearly.

Lefebvre's (1991:38) second term, "representations of space," refers to the diagrammatic, Cartesian conception of existing spaces and spaces-to-be, as spaces that can be understood in abstraction, and created, changed or destroyed through the power of the abstract. Lefebvre locates this kind of space primarily with "scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers, [and] a certain type of artist with a scientific bent – all of whom identify what is lived and what is perceived with what is conceived." However, Lefebvre (1991:38) also points out that "this is the dominant space in any society," implying that those who operate most within this mode of spatial understanding are also those most empowered to control and intervene in the creation of structures that impact on the daily spatial practice of others (Lefebvre 1991:38).

Lefebvre's third term, "representational space," encompasses the symbolic aspects of our spatial experience: "Space as directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of 'inhabitants' and 'users' … It overlays physical space, making symbolic

use of its objects" (Lefebvre 1991:38). Lefebvre later elaborates: "Representational space is alive: it speaks. It has an affective kernel or centre: Ego, bed, bedroom, dwelling, house; or: square, church, graveyard ... the only products of representational spaces are symbolic works." (Lefebvre 1991:42)

The case study below details a microcosmic view of spatial practice in Johannesburg's inner-city environment, and illustrates the usefulness of the above terms in the understanding of complex urban interactions.

Case study: corner Small and Jeppe Streets

In 2005, Theresa Collins and myself formulated the *Minutes* Project, consolidating a period of experimentation with time lapse photography on film and a shared interest in documenting and processing our experiences of urban Johannesburg. The *Minutes* Project has continued to evolve and takes the form of short time lapse sequences documenting specific sites in the city, mostly over 24-hour periods, as well as experimentally processed audio recordings. The films have been presented in various formats and settings locally and internationally.[1]

I return to one of these short films as an example of how, firstly, the time-compression of time lapse photography can reveal patterns of spatial practice, and secondly attempt to draw some conclusions about the significance of the patterns that are revealed.

The short film, produced in 2005, documents the activity around a street corner in central Johannesburg for 24 hours. The camera was set up to shoot one frame of film every 20 seconds, compressing the activity of the day and night into just less than three minutes of viewing time. We were present at the location for about four hours in the morning (from before sunrise to full daylight), and a similar time in the evening to make the necessary adjustments to the camera. As such, much of what unfolded during the day was unanticipated and only revealed at the first viewing of the footage.

The street corner filmed is at the intersection of Jeppe Street - one of the busiest one-way streets connecting the east and west Central Business District (CBD) and Small Street - a pedestrian mall cutting north-south across the CBD. Figure 1 is a rough sketch, a kind of "representation of space" of the corner as it would look if unoccupied (which it almost never is).

Pedestrians pass the corner in two directions: shoppers and commuters flow with the pulse of the traffic light in both directions across Jeppe Street to the next segment of Small Street shops, while a more continuous, intertwined movement flows up and down along the Jeppe Street pavement. The flow of pedestrians along this pavement is

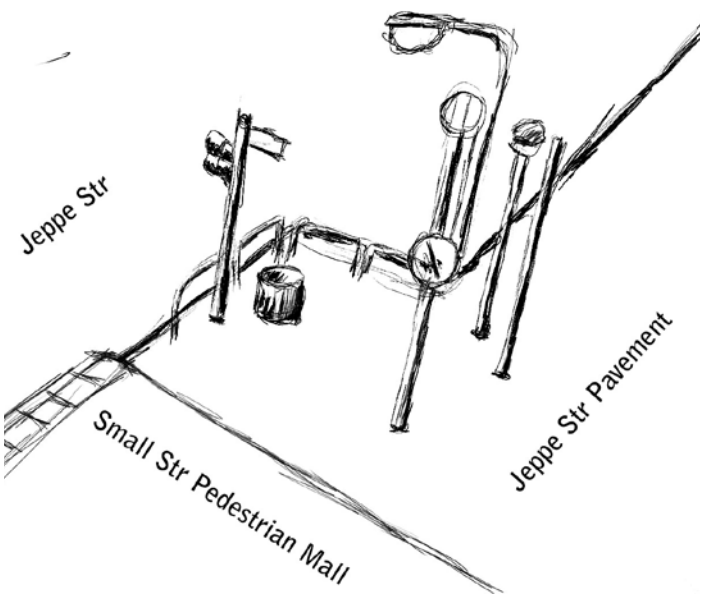

fig 1 A spatial layout sketch of the island at the corner of Jeppe and Small Streets, Johannesburg CBD

more or less continuous, while the flow of pedestrians moving in both directions along Small Street and across Jeppe Street is controlled, in a measured pulse, by the traffic light.

A parking bay cuts away one side of the corner, forming a 'dog's leg'. A sign indicates that no hawkers are allowed. A traffic light is positioned to regulate the flow of pedestrians and traffic. A small area (the 'dog's leg') is demarcated by six poles (street lamps, signs and the traffic light), as well as metal railings on two sides meant to inhibit pedestrians from spilling into the street to the side of the crossing or the parking bay. A dustbin is positioned next to the railing and traffic light.

This small square space, demarcated almost accidentally, and surrounded with signs and control measures, is an island encircled on all sides by flow and movement during the day. For this reason, and because of its placement at a junction where pedestrians pause before crossing the busy street, the island is a prime location for hawking and marketing, despite the 'no hawkers' sign. In terms of spatial practice, there is a sense that the practice which governs the movements of pedestrians (and, in widening circles, also the traffic, shops and surrounding buildings) has predetermined or produced the viability of this arbitrary space as a location for informal trade. This makes the 'no hawking' sign more than a signifier of control measures: it takes on the full irony of the disparity between the

deployment of urban space in Johannesburg and the needs of the users or inhabitants of these spaces.

As the 24-hour cycle unfolds on film, it becomes clear that the space is collectively transformed and to an extent appropriated (the notion of 'appropriated space' is discussed in more detail below) through the daily rhythms of people who occupy it in turn, each leaving traces that help to create a continuity of human presence. Due to the proximity of security guards at night, the space is also a convenient storage location. A lockable newspaper vending stall (which has become a permanent feature), a mobile food stand, a few chairs and mbaules (pierced metal drums used for fires) are stored here at various times. The temporary occupants of the space become custodians of these items.

At night the space belongs to security guards, who warm themselves around a fire in a mbaule. The rhythm of their occupation is punctuated by periodic absences as each takes a turn to search for fuel to keep the fire alive. After each short absence the fire flares up as the fuel is added, and then burns down until the next trip is made. At the end of their shift, the guards are joined by Metro policemen, who don't collect fuel and abandon the mbaule after dawn (the guards having left just after the first light).

The newspaper vendor, who occupies the space for the longest period, opens his stall well before the first light. At dawn, the owner of the food stall which has been parked next to the newspaper stand collects the mobile stall, which is returned at dusk. Some time after dawn, a woman takes a seat with her back to the newspaper stall: she advertises hairstyles available at a nearby salon or pavement hairstylist, with photographs of the styles pasted on a cardboard sheet. She is soon joined by more women who arrange themselves around the news stall, each with a similar catalogue of hairstyles. Towards the end of the day the women cluster together, chatting for the last hour of their shift, and leaving well before dusk.

The area around the dustbin is periodically used as temporary depot for various quantities of junk: heaps of plastic or cardboard packing pile up, remaining there for no more than an hour before being removed by people who have found a use for these materials.

The following notes, although maybe in a sense cryptic, are included to demonstrate some elements of the method of analysis I have employed. The time codes noted in the first section are from the final film, where one minute of film time represents about eight and a half hours of real time:

Sequence of Events

TIME CODE IN FILM TIME AS MINUTES:SECONDS:FRAMES

00:01:06	Scene clear
00:15:00	1st sign of guards
00:15:16	Mbaule appears
00:16:17	Fire blazing
00:17:03	Guards around fire
00:44:17	12:00 midnight
01:15:13	Stall owner arrives
01:23:06	1st Metro cop
01:27:13	Fire down
01:28:00	Dawn begins
01:29:04	All metro cops (guards gone)
01:32:13	Metro cops gone, mbaule abandoned
01:33:02	Hotdog goes
01:36:02	Dawn ends
01:41:24	Mbaule stashed
01:42:19	Hair seller appears
01:43:17	2nd hair seller appears
01:53:03	Plastic starts accumulating at bin
02:04:06	Plastic taken
02:08:14	Cardboard accumulates at bin
02:09:17	12:00 midday
02:18:02	Cardboard taken
02:25:18	3rd hairseller joins
02:27:00	4th woman joins
02:31:20	4th hair seller joins
02:34:06	Women (hair sellers) leave
02:40:18	Stall closes
02:46:04	Dusk begins
02:47:01	Hotdog returns
02:48:12	Dusk ends
02:51:17	Cardboard trolley appears

DURATIONS OF PRESENCE / ACTIVITY:

Guards:	**10:27:53**
Newsvendor:	**12:01:21**
Metro cops:	**01:18:34**
Food seller:	**10:26:11**
Hair sellers:	**07:15:51**
Mbaule:	**12:10:50**
Plastic:	**01:34:08**
Cardboard:	**01:20:36**
Fire:	**09:59:46**
Dawn-dusk:	**11:01:45**
Quiet time:	**01:56:30**

fig 2 Theresa Collins & Mocke Jansen van Veuren, Video stills from the *Minutes* Project, 2005
Time lapse photography
18 min
Courtesy of the artists

The way in which the camera is employed here makes it an analytical tool: through the process of time condensation the camera brings slower movements and rhythms into our perceptual field, while many of the usual recognisable movement patterns are discarded. The periodic dimming and flaring up of the fire as it burns low and fuel is added would, in normal time, be perceived in the background as a slow pattern, lasting about half an hour per cycle; in the film, the cycle of flaring and dimming occurs at a rate of a few seconds per cycle, which locates it more in the foreground of our perceptual field. This also brings to our attention the fact that a guard periodically leaves the group to look for fuel in the surrounding area each time the fire dies down.

From the above information we can get a fairly clear picture of the usage of the space, and we also have an indication of the lengths of the working days of the various occupants of the space. The fact that this cycle of occupation and activity is repeated on a daily basis means that the occupants of the space are living out a significant part of their daily lives within this oddly demarcated area.

Through its varied usage, the corner has been given a value (within representational space) as a haven of sorts; to all of the urban citizens who spend from six to twelve hours per day on that island it is no longer an accidental convergence of arbitrary features of the street. The presence or traces of each temporary inhabitant of the space become legible signs, indicating amongst other things that the space has an element of safety, that it is well positioned for marketing, that it can be occupied without disturbance for long periods, that it is a place of stable human presence, and that it is an island of stability in the sea of frantic movement around it.

As mentioned earlier, underlying conflicts and tensions in the deployment, control and usage of urban spaces necessarily emerge when engaging with urban space in Johannesburg at this level. These aspects are discussed in more detail below.

Appropriated space, diverted space and the right to the city

> **The streets of the suburb still show signs of that degeneration: they're blowing with garbage, the pavements are dotted with hawkers and their wares, and unemployed people gather in groups on street corners. (Davie 2003:1)**

The above quotation, found on the official City of Johannesburg website (www.joburg.org.za), is a comment on the area surrounding the Ponte building, one of Johannesburg's most iconic residential structures, which is undergoing an attempted transformation into (or back to) an upmarket apartment building. The analysis I have presented touches on the disparity between the needs and practices of informal traders (so nonchalantly equated with garbage in the above quotation) and the spaces within which they operate. I have also shown how a network of informal traders and other urban inhabitants overcome this disparity by layering an interlinked spatial practice over seemingly hostile or arbitrary spaces. In the discussion below, I unpack some of these issues with reference to the concepts of appropriated space, diverted space and the right to the city.

Lefebvre (1991:165) uses the term "appropriated space" to denote "a natural space modified in order to serve the needs and possibilities of a group". This presupposes an almost ideal situation, where no tension exists between the structuring of a space and the groups or individuals which lay claim to it in terms of ownership or everyday usage. In such a situation, the relationship between space and user is in a sense 'virginal', without a history of conflict and change. The word 'natural' as Lefebvre uses it here needs some qualification, as it seems to imply that the concept of appropriated space is only applicable in situations where a natural environment is for the first time modified to accommodate human habitation. Lefebvre in fact, often introduces a new term in an essentialist sense, later broadening its application, whilst still always retaining a link to its purest meaning. In this way various kinds of urban spaces could be seen as being fully appropriated, including a street or a square (Lefebvre 1991:165), as long as a strong correlation exists between the form the space assumes and the users' spatial needs.

Lefebvre (1991:167) later introduces the idea of "diverted space" where "an existing space may outlive its original purpose and the *raison d'être* which determines its forms, functions and structures; it may thus in a sense become vacant, and susceptible of being diverted, re-appropriated and put to a use quite different from its initial one". The usage of the street corner discussed here does not fall neatly into either of these categories, but Lefebvre's terms can be used to penetrate the complexity of the situation. For instance, there is an uncomfortable gap between the actual usage of the space and the shape it retains … one would imagine that through the repeated daily cycles of usage, the corner would be physically transformed (through gradual, cumulative processes as well as more direct, intensive, programmatic interventions) into something that could be called 'appropriated' in the above sense. However, the space remains makeshift and alienating; the only factors adding to the space's habitability are the human presences and their transient traces. In this sense the space is appropriated only in a very tenuous, impermanent fashion, and no sense of ownership is present. Lefebvre (1991:165) lists some form of ownership or possession as a precondition for appropriation.

The space also is diverted in the sense that it is transformed into a meaningful place from a relatively meaningless location, a segment of pavement jutting out beyond the flow of pedestrian traffic. It becomes susceptible to diversion perhaps because of its limited functionality as pavement and because it is, at least partially, 'vacant' and thus open to be given new meaning in Lefebvre's sense of representational space.

AbdouMaliq Simone (2004) has drawn attention to a distributed network of human connections, relationships and interactions that form an infrastructure supporting the livelihoods and aspirations of many inhabitants of African cities operating outside of the formal economy, with particular reference to Johannesburg. He (2004:408) writes that "The accelerated, extended, and intensified intersections of bodies, landscapes, objects, and technologies defer calcification of institutional ensembles or fixed territories of belonging". In other words, there is something necessarily fluid and ephemeral about these informal support networks. This fluidity simultaneously shows strength and vulnerability: while it allows for improvisation and flexibility, it also means that there can be no reliance on the stability of an institutionalised base.

Simone (2006) argues that, in a city like Johannesburg, survival for many inhabitants necessitates a creative and flexible approach to the usage of spaces, which leads often to a kind of spatial "piracy". Linking back again to Lefebvre's concept of diverted spaces, this spatial piracy implies a more drastic event: while Lefebvre sketches a situation where a space outlives its original function, becoming 'vacant' before being re-appropriated for a different purpose, the

kind of approach described by Simone does not wait for this 'vacancy' but re-invents the function of a space in response to an immediate need or opportunity, without institutional support and sometimes contrary to the intentions of institutional urban governance.

The usage of the street corner described here may be understood to reveal these issues in a microcosmic fashion: even though the sequence of occupants may not know each other, there is something of a shared, networked project in their usage of the space. Each supports the other in a relay process, contributing to a kind of gentle piracy which makes the corner viable and usable in various ways both in the day and at night. This process is undertaken without any reliance on an institutionally granted right to do so, and, in fact, the 'no hawking' sign signals an underlying clash of interests.

The notion of the 'right to the city', which derives from Lefebvre (Purcell 2002:99-108), is a utopian concept, which has much currency recently in urban studies. Simone (2005:323) argues that this concept should "not in the end [be] reduced to the right to be maintained in the city – that is, to be housed and serviced. It must include the selective right to use the city as an arena of mutable aspirations, to varying degrees of realization". Mark Purcell (2002:102) also argues for an understanding of the term which focuses on the rights of urban inhabitants to be involved in the processes that shape the spaces in which they live out their lives: "Under the right to the city, membership in the community of enfranchised people is not an accident of nationality or ethnicity or birth; rather it is earned by living out the routines of everyday life in the space of the city".

This radical idea, as Purcell (2002:103-105) notes, is problematic in its application because it circumvents and contradicts the delineations and separations of rights as governed by national citizenry. However, a salient point here is that participation in decision making processes that shape spaces is seen to be earned by the users of those spaces – their right to play a part in those decisions are not quantifiable in terms of economic value, but in terms of time spent living out everyday life in that space. If this principle were to be applied to the street scene discussed above, the security guards, newspaper vendor, hairdressers and others who occupy the space in turn would not only be consulted, but would be directly involved in decision making about the management of that small space (which may include modifications to better serve their needs), and would also be party to decision making that impacts on the web of physical spaces and spatial practice within which the street corner is nested.

Conclusion

The analysis of a time lapse film undertaken above, with the application of Lefebvre's concepts of space, reveals dynamics of spatial practice which on a microcosmic level illustrates the complexity and underlying tensions of spatial usage and control in urban Johannesburg.

From this analysis, it becomes evident that the 'clean' idea of a dialectical relationship between a society's spatial practice and the space which it "secretes" (Lefebvre 1991:38) becomes fouled if the society in question is at odds with itself, or, more accurately, if the relationship between space and spatial practice becomes a battleground for conflicting interests. This conflict is neatly encapsulated in the 'no hawking' sign above the informal traders at the corner discussed above. This sign becomes a concrete manifestation of the clashes between formal and informal economies and structures, and the clashes which also take place at the level of governance and the drawing up of development policies.

In this sense, despite the numerous and innovative strategies to move Johannesburg out of its apartheid legacy of inequality and division (Simone 2005:321-322), there is still reason for concern that many of the intentions behind current urban interventions are closer to neoliberal programmes (Purcell 2002:99) focused on profit and macroeconomic growth than to real engagement with the complex needs of the urban inhabitant.

The brief study undertaken here is part of a continuing analytical engagement with Johannesburg's contested spaces. I envision that this project will develop into a body of work which can be used as a referent in debates around urban development and governance in Johannesburg.

Endnotes

1. Work from the *Minutes* Project has been shown in various formats and contexts over the last four years, starting in 2005 with a three-screen synchronised performance at the Horror Café in Newtown, Johannesburg. The screening was accompanied by live music by Kwani Experience's *Crippled & Unrehearsed*. Further films have since been combined in single, two, three and five screen synchronised installations with experimentally processed location audio. These have been shown in Johannesburg, Cape Town, Havana, São Paulo, London, Delft and Berlin.

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